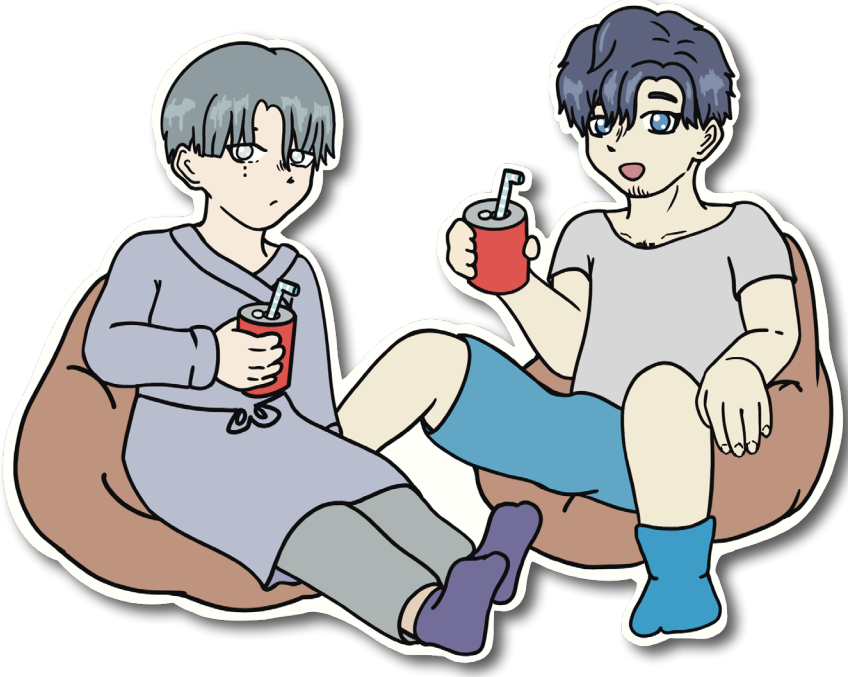
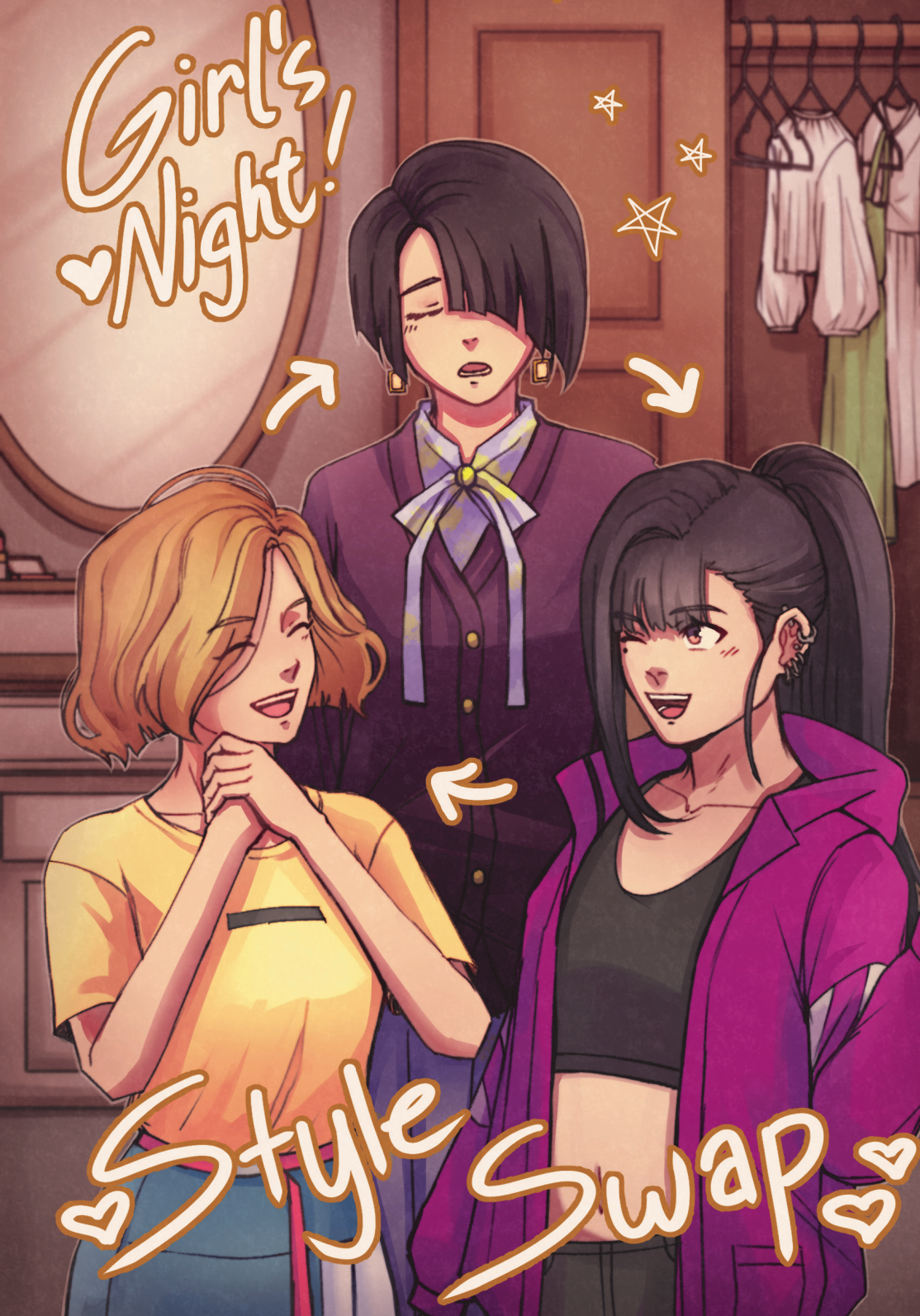
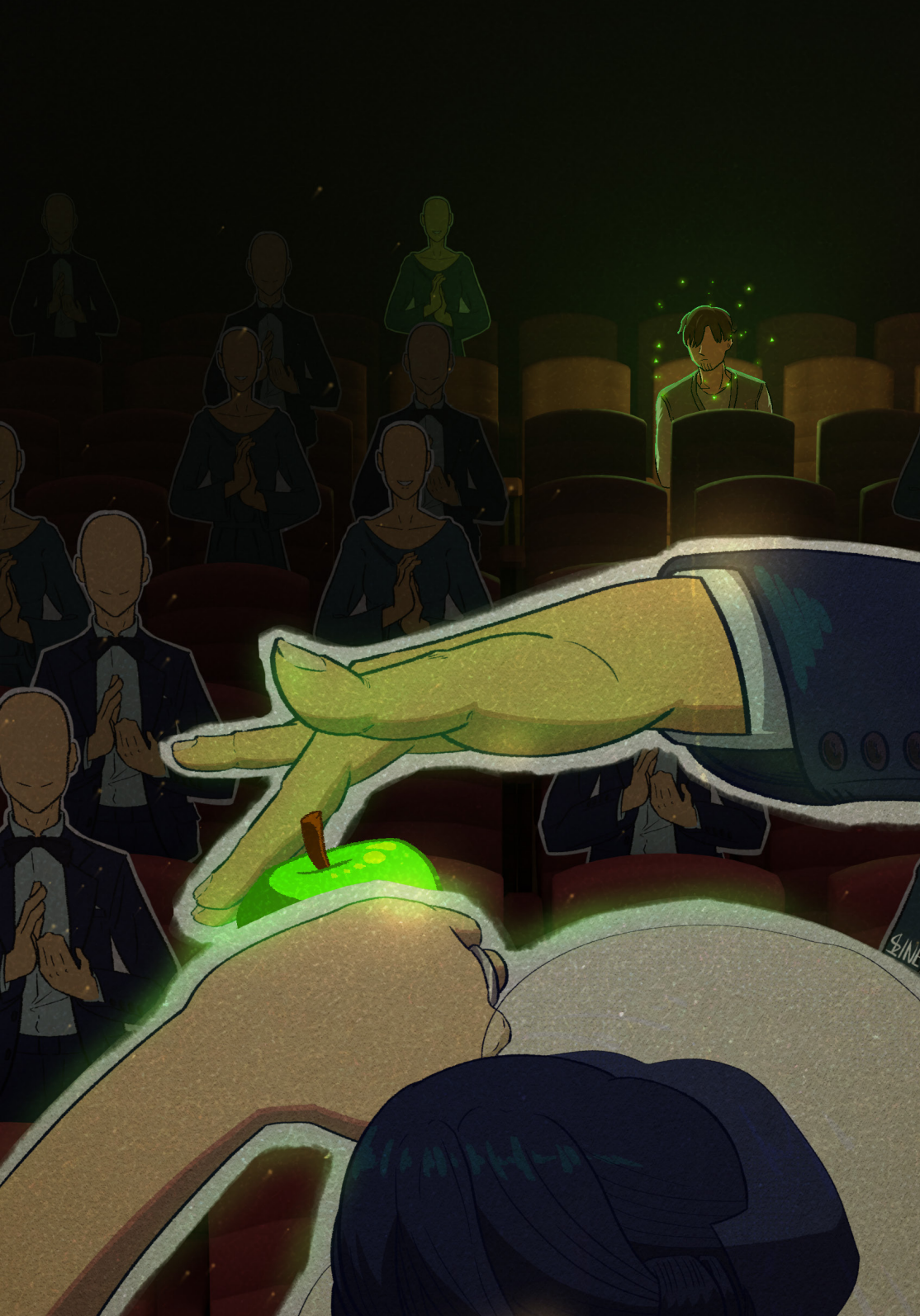
MILGRAM:
CONFIDENTIAL FILES



Haruka
I GIVE UP!!


Girl's Night!
Style Swap

LOVE



So Morning Rise to Light Us

You are always, always talking about yourself.
It doesn't matter how willing or withdrawn one may be. The way someone dresses, the way they hold themselves, the way they act, the way they don't: everything speaks.
It's impossible to avoid these self-informants. Es used this to their advantage. They didn't think Jackalope's promise of vague videos would be enough to complete a murder investigation, and in a way, they were correct. The prisoners found other ways to talk about themselves.
Es studied them while they ate their meals, conversed in the common area, or passed whispers between the cell bars at night. They watched the developing friendships and fast-approaching fights. They noted what made the prisoners smile. What made them flinch.
But even in the most basic, mundane moments – ones that Es would never think of watching so closely – the prisoners never stopped speaking about themselves.
"I… I like that toothpaste b-better." Haruka pointed across the sink.
"Koto-k-kotoko, could you, um!"
"Huh? Here, you can use it."
Before any verdicts were announced, before everything fell into chaos, the prisoners got comfortable with one another's morning routines. The washroom filled with gentle chatter and running water. As requests arrived, product bottles filled up the counters.
Shidou and Kotoko arrived first, just after the early bell. Mahiru would greet each prisoner by name on her way to her favorite spot. Kazui used to be one of the earliest, but as time went on, he joined everyone around the same time Fuuta finally dragged himself in. Haruka counted the seconds he brushed his teeth. Everything was done methodically. He stood a few paces back, waiting silently for an opening at one of the sinks. Yuno nudged people out of her way when needed, sometimes doing the same for Haruka's sake.

“‘Scuse us!” she’d say with a smile that made it difficult to take too harshly.
Fuuta would splash cold water over his face, scrunching up his expression as if the shock could wake him up. He and Haruka were the last to don their uniforms, getting ready in their disheveled pajamas. Shidou, too, stayed in his nightclothes longer than the others (though Muu was jealous of how put-together he looked regardless.)
Not that she appeared anything less herself. Muu did everything gracefully. Carefully. Even though Kotoko was the only person studying the others, Muu couldn’t bear to watch herself stumble around clumsily. Her mother hadn’t raised her to stand awkwardly in front of a mirror, after all.
“Ah, pardon me.”
Shidou placed his gloves in his pocket while he brushed his teeth and flossed; they’d get immediately splashed if left on the countertop. Despite being up first, his peaceful smile was nowhere to be seen when he first woke. Mahiru learned to hold off her conversation with him until breakfast.
Instead, she turned to the others while she worked, which lengthened her already extensive morning routine with conversation.
“I’m still thinking of that story you told at dinner last night, I cannot be-lieve he said that to you!” A smile. “That color suits you nicely!” A smile. “No, no, you’re fine, I was just about done anyways!” A smile.

A ways down, Mikoto flashed his grin almost as often as she did. He examined himself in the mirror like an actor making final preparations in their dressing room mirror (no matter how many times his comments about being on television were met with odd looks).
Although he took half as long as Mikoto, Kazui also seemed to be checking his appearance for something. He and Yuno studied their faces carefully. Both were easily coaxed into a grin by Mahiru’s chatter.
Kazui let out one of his booming laughs as he combed his hair. “You don’t say? You’re much more up with the trends than I am, I suppose…”
With her own container of floss, Amane went dutifully to her tasks. She washed her face and brushed her hair smooth. If the toothpaste or soap had been passed too far across the washroom, she requested it with perfected courtesy.

“You don’t have to ask,” Fuuta told her, his mouth full of foam. “It’s not like it belongs to anyone. If you want it, just take it.”
The next day, Amane pointed to it once more. “May I use that, please?”
Kotoko passed it to her, awing everyone with the fact she always had a free hand. She brushed her hair with her toothbrush in her mouth, buckling her uniform in between strokes. She helped offer items back and forth, even when the request was muttered too quietly for anyone else to notice.
“Shidou!!”
“My apologies…”
The man never missed a morning shower. The mirror steamed up, interrupting those trying to style themselves. Mikoto never joined in the complaints, though his routine always took a blow for it. He practically had it timed down to the second. He continued moving like clockwork through the sequence, regardless of the reminders that he didn’t need to rush into work on time.
“Why slow down?” Mikoto would reply with a laugh. “It’s worked fine for this long, I don’t see why I need to change anything now…” want this one? You mentioned it yesterday.”

If Yuno was in a good mood, and Shidou had already taken the fall for the foggy mirror, she’d enjoy a lengthy shower. She’d sing without a care about who was still around to hear. Afterwards, the others may find her taking on the extensive process of doing up her hair in new designs. If Kazui or Mikoto showered after her, she’d find a glimmer of silver jewelry left on the countertop while they were gone.
Even while the mirrors proved useless in the steam, the room was busy for a long time.
“I can do yours next, if you like.” Mahiru held up her hairbrush. She always used her sweetest voice for Amane, and the most threatening one she could muster for Fuuta. Neither took her up on the offer. Yuno did sometimes; Mahiru never let her down.
The two of them could spend the longest with their pins and clips. Some joked that they were equipped with a new styling tool each morning. Muu often joined them in patting powders and lotions and makeup onto their faces. Now and then, they’d enjoy the company of those trimming their short hair and shaving their cheeks.

Haruka watched the two groups with wide eyes. Both seemed to terrify and tempt him. If the conversation caught her attention, Kotoko positioned herself nearby to listen with a peaceful look.

“Over here,” she’d hand Muu a hair clip she was looking for. “Or did you want this one? You mentioned it yesterday.”
Hands extended across the sinks: reaching, retrieving, pointing. Uniforms were straightened, belts untwisted and tightened. Possessions traveled down a line of passing hands. Smiles reflected in the steamed glass.
“Thank you!”
“Thank you.”
“Thanks.”
“Thank you.”
As all of them knew, every good thing must come to an end.

Verdicts were announced. The mornings changed.
Their chatter dulled; the rushing of water overtook the room. With the sound echoing around him, Haruka stared into the mirror like big aquarium glass. Everyone looked awfully small in it.
Amane would stand in the same place, the sound ringing in her ears. She was the only one who looked smaller. She quickly turned away. The musical showers became scarce. Yuno would just sweep her hair into a simple ponytail once wet. She no longer saw Kazui’s ring on the counter.
Shidou put his uniform on a bit earlier each morning. Somedays, he even strolled in with the coat completely fastened. Fuuta was even slower with his, the added belts always getting tangled and falling into the sink. He hardly noticed. He was always looking over his shoulder. Aside from meals, this was the only place the prisoners saw him lower his mask and show his face.

“What are you looking at?” Muu would ask. Their reflections often came side by side, these days.
“O-oh. It’s nothing.” He could never quite put it into words.
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Mahiru still flashed her smile as often as possible. It grew more and more intense, making up for the increasing frowns around her. Kotoko's contemplating stare was the best she could get, some days. She couldn't count on Yuno's bubbliness all the time. Even Amane's pleasant politeness turned to cold formality.
"Please let us through," she would say, marching up to one of the sinks. Her expression sharpened when one of the nearby showers was in use. Her frown twitched as she struggled with the new belts on her own uniform. Yet, she never said a word about anything. She stopped asking the others for help. It was fine, then, that Kotoko's free hand was always occupied when anyone was in need.
Mikoto's eyes lingered on the mirror. He no longer admired his clean appearance – now, he was searching, searching, searching.

Es disappeared. Things continued to change.
The prisoners staggered their visits in the morning. Watchful eyes waited for the room to clear.
Hands did not reach out to comb hair or fix clothing. The only time they reached out was to sponge some stinging disinfectant onto someone's skin, adjust a bandage from where it had loosened, or return a dropped possession and continue in silence without meeting the other's gaze. Even Mahiru fell silent as she wheeled herself past anyone washing up.

Kotoko still rose with the bell. She hurried around in the morning as if she had places to be. The speed of her showers rivaled Mikoto's – she spent as little time as possible unguarded.

Muu spent the most time washing up. Somedays, she stood by the sink for as long as she could without Haruka coming back to check on her. Eyes distant with sleep, she'd scrub and scrub at her hands, trying to rid herself of something long cleaned off. She could feel it between her fingers, still.
Shidou occasionally interrupted her to wash very real blood from his palms.
"Now keep that covered," he'd finish saying. "I've done what I can." Then, quieter, "I'm sorry it's not enough."

He'd place his stained gloves on the counter, no longer caring how they were ruined. If Muu didn't flee so quickly, she might have caught him doing the same as her: scouring his hands long after all the red had flushed away.

Amane also found herself more intense about cleanliness. She scrubbed her arms raw. She flossed her teeth until they bled. It was ironic how her appearance became more unkempt as she channeled all her energy into a rigid, spotless routine. Her expression would only soften when Mahiru asked to help comb her wild hair, but she always insisted, "we will not be tempted into vanity."

Once, the prisoners woke up to a massive spiderweb crack in one of the mirrors. Mikoto's knuckles were hastily bandaged, and for the first time he was completely silent on the subject of blackouts.

No one blamed him. Most looked into the mirror as if they couldn't recognize who was staring back. Haruka could have gazed and gazed for hours at that person standing proud, happy, loved. Yuno's eyes flicked over the glass as if sizing someone up. Fuuta preferred not to look in the mirror at all. They didn't even look at each other through it. Kazui would blink if Kotoko appeared in the misted glass. After years of brushing his teeth alongside the same dark hair, it was strange to see her out of the corner of his eye. Fuuta hoped no one saw him flinch if Yuno walked up too quickly behind him. Mahiru went pale if she spotted Mikoto with his hair wet, having a familiar waviness to it. He'd give her a funny look when he noticed her staring.

"Hah, sorry. For a minute… it's just… I thought you were someone else."

His eyes would darken. "Nope. It's me."

Kazui approached Yuno on the morning of his extraction. She picked the furthest spot from him to brush her teeth, but he inched closer.

"Yuno… what did you do to make it go so well? Your interrogation, that is."

Her eyes remained cold. "Just be yourself."

"I wish I could." He turned his back to the mirror. He put his bare hands in his pockets. "But I can't say anything about myself. I can't."

He didn't realize that he always, always was.

HONOR

Something New

"So… you need a song in English?" Haruka asked, just to be sure. Muu looked up at him, taking a break from lying on her stomach and leafing through sheet music to sit up and nod.

"Yes. Well, kind of." She picked up one of the papers from the top of the messy stack she was sorting through and held it up. "I need a song written by a composer who wrote in English. Something about how the musical we're doing is originally written in English as well." She pointed to the paper she was holding. A bunch of lines on a paper- a staff, he recalled, with a lot of symbols positioned across it, which he recognized to be notes. What he assumed was the title was written at the top of the paper in big, bold letters. "Like, this is (Foolish Love) from the Death Note musical. It was written by an American composer, but it was translated to Japanese for productions here. It was called (When Love Comes)
in America."

"Ah, that's very interesting, Muu." Haruka didn't fully understand, not really, and that was obvious from the look on his face. But he was trying his best to be helpful, because Muu had invited him over to her house to help her pick out an audition song. She'd wanted him to help her out with this thing for this musical she wanted to be in.
So help he would.

"I actually think it's a little stupid," she said nonchalantly, dropping the sheet music unceremoniously. It hit the floor, rustling as it fell among the other papers. She pointed to another one that was scattered a little farther than the others, close to where Haruka was sitting. "Can you hand me that one?"
Now it was Haruka's turn to nod in affirmation, picking up the paper and handing it to her, after taking a quick glance at it.

It didn't make much sense to him, not the staff and the notes and the key signature. But for once, at least he could actually read the title. "(What The World Needs)?" he echoed. "What does it need?"

"That one's more recent. It's from Ride The Cyclone. It was… I think a Canadian musical? It got popular on the internet a while back."

"Is it in your… your… ah…" Haruka scoured his brain for the word.
He knew what he was looking for, it was like a word that describes how high and low you could sing? He'd heard Muu say it many times, as well as his other classmates, but couldn't remember it.

"My range. Everything I own is in my range," she said. Her tone was very sharp and matter-of-fact, but it was free of any thing like a 'duh' or an 'obviously'. "It's nearly three octaves."

Haruka must have looked clearly confused on what to say, so Muu sighed, then smiled and explained it to him.

"It's a good thing. It means I can sing really high, or really low."

She showed off the sheet music she was holding, pointing to various notes- one higher on the staff as she said the word high and one lower on the staff when she said low.

Haruka realized what she just said was probably very impressive- a bigger range meant having more notes, which was probably better. Muu did look very proud. Her eyes were sparkling as she talked about it- it was clearly something she was passionate about. He peered at the sheet she was holding.

"So… you can sing this song well? Are you going to use it to audition?"

Muu tapped her chin. It seemed like she hadn't thought that far yet, just getting caught up in explaining the concept of vocal ranges.
She shrugged.

"Well, maybe. Choosing an audition song can be more complicated than that. My vocal coach told me I could sing most songs very well."
She turned the sheet around, scanning it up and down. "But the question is mostly if it's the best song for the type of musical and the character I'm auditioning for."

"Oh… well, what kind of character are you auditioning for?" Haruka asked. Muu beamed back at him, like she had been waiting for him to ask this very question.

"The lead. She's beautiful, talented, pure, and charming,." She said. With each trait she listed, she giggled a little bit.

"Ah… she sounds a lot like you, Muu."

Muu smiled even wider. And there it was. That sparkle again. She clapped her hands together in excitement.

"Thank you! That's why I'm auditioning for her." She finally set down the music she was looking at. "So I don't think this song will really fit the role I'm auditioning for."

Her smile fell. She closed her eyes for a second, probably to think.

Haruka also thought for a moment. He knew some English songs, right? Like the ones that would sometimes play in restaurants when they felt like changing up the radio station?

"Why don't you sing… um…" He decided on the first song that came to mind. "That one that goes like…" He did his best to imitate the opening part of (Born This Way). He didn't know the words, he was in a completely different key, and he screwed up the rhythm, but Muu understood what he was singing. That was a win.

"That's not from a musical," she said.

That was a little bit embarrassing. He looked down at his hands, which were folded in his lap. He'd been getting better at eye contact, especially with Muu, but there were moments when it would be too much.

"Oh."

Muu went back to looking through the music, and the two sat in silence for a while. After a few minutes, Haruka laid down on his back, looking at the high ceiling of Muu's living room. The gigantic crystal chandelier sparkled above him. Shiny. Sparkly. It rotated slowly, in a way that was barely visible. Mesmerizing. He may have zoned out a bit, just watching the light reflect off the sparkling glassy pieces, but was reminded of where he was by a gentle push on his right shoulder.

"Haruka! I just had an idea!" Muu said excitedly. She was right next to him now, hovering over him. "Why don't you audition too?

We could be in the musical together!"

Haruka sat up again.

"I don't know anything about singing… and I'm scared in front of people…" he said nervously. "I don't think I could do anything like that."

But it was a tempting idea. He knew nothing about performing, but it would mean spending more time with his friend. That… that could be fun. She could probably help him understand how it worked a little better, right?

"I mean, you'll probably get ensemble, but you'd get to watch me perform when you're not on stage!" She sounded excited. Then a brief pause. "Well, that's technically not allowed by the director, but nobody cares if someone actually does it."

"I mean, I guess it could be fun…" he began. "But what if something happens?" He'd heard stories from Muu about various theatre mishaps. Like the time a male lead slipped and fell flat on his face on a soap bubble from the bubble blowers they had stationed on stage. Or the time a girl reached for her prop weapon in her right pocket, and spent a solid thirty seconds looking for it before realizing it was in her left. He wasn't sure he could play that off like a more accomplished actor could. "What if I fall down?"

"If you're ensemble, people probably won't be looking," she said and shrugged. "There's usually going to be someone else on stage who people are paying more attention to." She stopped to think for a second. "Unless you mess up so badly that it reflects badly on whoever is supposed to be the center of attention right then."

"That can happen?" Haruka asked nervously. The idea of messing up on a stage was bad enough, but doing it in a way that would ruin the performance for the other people there too? It would just be him being a burden all over again.

"Yeah. But it won't if you just practice a lot. I promise, you'll be fine."

Maybe she was making promises a little too easily. Things… didn't usually turn out as well for him as they did for other people. Even the same things that everybody else was doing. A play… a musical… performing… that wasn't something he'd done before. Or something he thought he'd ever do. It wasn't something he thought he could do. But she said he could, and that meant something. The words came out of her mouth so casually, but they were surprisingly reassuring.

"...I'll do it."

RUMBLE
How long has it been?
I think it's been over an hour now...
The one who requested the cards
Maybe this was a bad idea...

BEEP BEEP!
BEEP BEEP!

Looking forward!
卒業証書
卒業証書
New beginnings!

1/17/2021
fu fu
It's a special day today! I can't help but feel sonething good's going to happen. ^_^
What's with all the muttering to yourself. It's creepy.
Geez, you really don't understand, Fuuta.
You'll never have a proper romance with that attitude!
Who cares.
Obviously this is because today's your birthday.
It's just the day you happened to be born, it doesn't mean anything.
Here, I'll give you my tomato, so just shut up and eat it.
?
That's your birth-day present, so be grateful.
!
END

A New Perspective

Mikoto leaned forward in his chair, eyes bleary, staring at his laptop and the sheets of paper in front of him. The voice on the review video droned on as his pencil began to slow and he stifled a yawn. It was late Friday night, nearing three in the morning, and he found himself repeating the same segments, struggling to process the information presented to him.

He was considering giving up for the night when he heard a noise come from his roommate's bed. "Tonight, we return to cover the robbery in the local shopping center-" The voice abruptly shut off as the girl sat up in bed.

"Listening to the news at this time of night?" Mikoto gave a quiet laugh.

Kotoko sighed. "Sorry."

He blinked. She hardly spoke to him, so he didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't an apology. "It's okay!" A pause. All he could hear were the occasional sounds of her shifting in place. "So… are you studying too? You major in law, so is it for a class?"

"Kind of."

Mikoto peered through the darkness at the girl, making out her vague figure. "Hmm, let me guess… extra credit?" In his mind, there was no way someone would be up this late watching news stories for fun, but Kotoko was a mystery to him.

"Something like that." She layed back down. For a moment, he thought the conversation was over, until he heard her voice again. "You should get some sleep."

"That's what I was thinking too, I can't focus at all." Yet, something compelled him to keep speaking. Maybe it's because he hadn't talked with someone properly in days, but the company felt nice. "You should too! Can't be protecting justice while sleep deprived."

Her reply came quickly. “I don’t need much sleep. It’s fine.” There was a slight edge to her voice.
Well, that’s something the two had in common. With midterms coming up, he hadn’t slept more than six hours in a while. Even on the weekends he was sure to wake up early.
“Well, at least grab some coffee when you’re up.”

“I drink tea.”

“Ooh, what kind? I like tea too.” Mikoto’s eyes brightened, even as waves of sleepiness were overtaking him.

“Black. Sometimes green, if I’m getting them from the vending machines around campus.”

He nodded. “I get those green teas too, sometimes, but I made myself chamomile tea back at home. When I go out, I get boba tea!”

“That’s nice. I wish we had a stovetop here, making your own tea is cheaper.”

He hummed in agreement. “I can’t wait to move into my own apartment. Then, when Mom and my sister come to visit, I can make them some.”

Kotoko nodded. She started to speak, before stifling a yawn. He glanced at a clock, remembering the time. “Oh, maybe we should sleep. Talk tomorrow?”

She murmured something Mikoto couldn’t quite hear. He thought about asking what she had said, but his eyes were growing heavy. The conversation had drained his mind of the energy he had left, and with a sigh, he laid down in bed. He’d just wake up early to study more, instead. As he drifted off to sleep, he called out one more time. “Good night!”

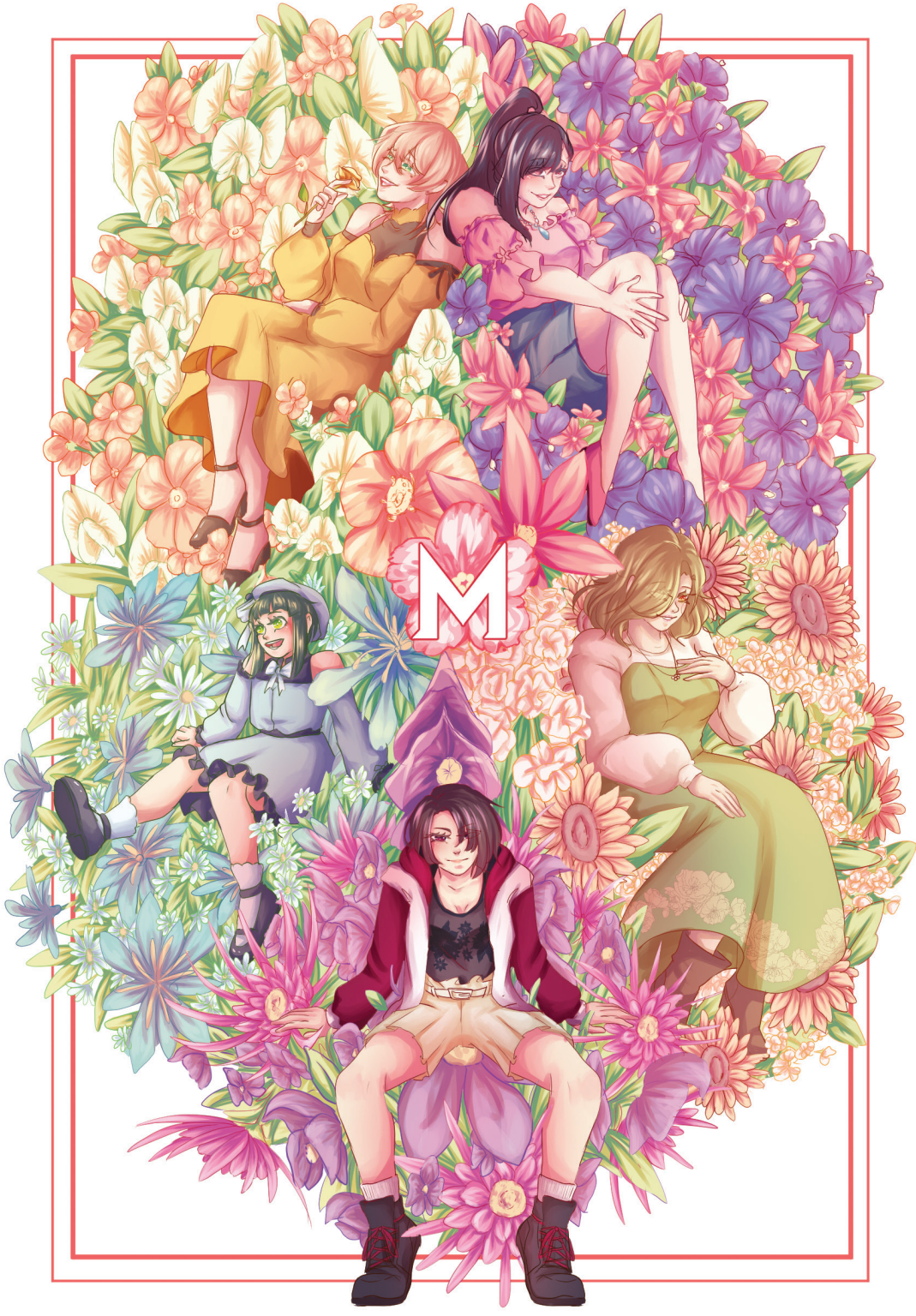
“Yeah.” She muttered noncommittally, and he heard her turn away. His mind continued to wander even as he tried to focus on rest, before he finally fell asleep.

Mikoto woke up to the sound of his alarm, at 8:00 AM. He stretched and glanced over to see Kotoko’s bed empty, as usual. He pulled himself out of bed, walking into the common room to see her with a bowl of oatmeal already. He poured himself some cereal and sat across from her, not without an annoyed glance that he missed.

“Good morning, Koko!”
She shot him another disdainful look, this time which he noticed.
“That’s not my name.”
“It’s a nickname, doesn’t it just roll off the tongue?”
She didn’t acknowledge his words. “Don’t give me one of those like everyone else.”
“I don’t give them to everyone, like people who are unapproachable.”
She stared for a second, stopping her spoon mid scoop. “I seem approachable to you?”
Mikoto chuckled nervously. “Um… well, we’re roommates, so we should get along.” The conversation they had last night was nice, but honestly, it was the most they had spoken in their weeks of living together. It certainly hadn’t changed his perception of her as distant.
Kotoko didn’t respond, instead returning to her food. He tapped his fingers along the side of the table, trying to think of a topic. “Do you like animals?”
“Dogs.”
“Really? I would’ve thought you preferred cats, with, uh… how quiet you are.”
“Wolves.” She clarified.
“Ah.” That made sense. “Well, I like both. I don’t think I’ll have time for a pet, though. I wouldn’t be able to give them the care they needed.”
Kotoko nodded. She glanced out the window in front of her.
“Birds are nice, too.”
“Yeah! It’s relaxing to birdwatch after a big exam. It’s like, they don’t even know it happened, so why should I be stressed?” He turned his chair to look behind him, watching a blue bird on a branch right outside.
For a few minutes, they both sat in silence, looking out at the view. At first, he simply thought about the peacefulness of nature, but soon Mikoto’s mind wandered. It was strange how much he had learned they had in common in just these few hours. Suddenly, Kotoko sighed and stood up, taking her bowl to the sink. She took a jacket from the coat rack and started to head out the door. “I’m going for a run.”
“You’re going without even saying bye, Koko?” He said with a cheeky grin. She gave another heavy sigh and went to shut the door.
“Wait! I do have something to say. Would you mind taking out the trash when you’re back?”

“‘Kay.” She said abruptly, shutting the door behind her.
The silence left behind was suffocating. Mikoto wasn’t able to even finish his cereal before the intrusive thoughts started setting in. Had he upset her…? He was just teasing about the nickname, but she sounded angry. Mikoto fiddled with his spoon in his bowl.
He stood up and walked to the sink. As he washed the dish, his thoughts swirled in his head. They seemed to be making progress – it almost seemed like she was enjoying their conversations, rather than just tolerating them. He wondered if he had misread her intentions, and she really was annoyed by him.
He tried to sit down and study some more, but he couldn’t focus. The thought kept nagging in the back of his mind, and after 20 minutes, he decided he’d just do it himself.
He searched around the room for any spare wrappers or other messes – most of these were on his side of the room, to be honest – before taking out the trash bag and carrying it carefully down the stairs of their dorms.
He had just gotten to the trash bin when he saw Kotoko rounding the corner. He hurriedly tried to stuff the trash bag in the bin before she saw him, but he struggled with its weight as he lifted it over his head. She slowed from her jogging pace as she approached him, and he smiled weakly at her. “Hey…”
She stared at him, head tilted. “Didn’t you… ask me to do that? I said I’d do it.”
Mikoto looked around, as if hoping someone could help him out of this awkward situation. “Well… I didn’t want to bother you, so I just decided to…” His head rang with sudden embarrassment; she wasn’t upset at all, why did he do this? He should’ve just waited if she was going to be back so soon.
To his surprise, Kotoko gave a chuckle, which reassured Mikoto enough for him to laugh as well.
“Well, whatever.” She came a bit closer and helped him push the trash bag over the lid of the bin, finally shutting it.

He mumbled his thanks, and she acknowledged him with a slight hum. She started to walk past him, and he hurried after her.
They had made their way to the front of the building when Mikoto was struck with an idea. “Ah- you go ahead, I’ll be back!” She looked questioningly at him, but didn’t stop him as he turned to walk further down the sidewalk. He speed-walked further into campus, heading towards the main building. The grounds were mostly empty, and so he quickly arrived at his destination - the vending machine outside the side entrance. Taking out his wallet from his back pocket, he paid for two drinks and began to rush back.
When he arrived at their room, Kotoko was sitting on the couch, scrolling through her phone. She glanced up at him as he entered. He held out one of the drinks to her. “Cold green tea. You mentioned it last night?”
She squinted. “What is this for?”
“I created the whole trouble with the trash and… well, just take it.” Mikoto shook the bottle gently in her direction. Kotoko tentatively grabbed it, before popping off the cap and taking a drink.
He looked at her expectantly. “Is it good?”
She laughed dryly. “It’s vending machine tea.”
“Okay, okay, fair.” He opened his own and took a sip.
As he did, her mouth turned up in a slight smile.
“Is it good, Mikoto?”
He scoffed indignantly. “It’s a reasonable question!” Still, he took another drink. “It is, surprisingly.”
She nodded and turned her head to face the window again. The conversation finished, he sat down at the table. He picked up his notebook from earlier and began to write down what he remembered from the video last night.
A few minutes passed. He stretched, putting his arms out and giving a short look around the room. To his surprise, Kotoko was looking at him. He gave a short wave and a smile that she didn’t reciprocate, so he tried speaking. “What’s up, Koko?”
She paused for a second as if reconsidering something, before finally speaking. “Thank you.”
He smiled, genuinely this time. “It’s no problem. Next time, we should go out and get some boba!” He raised his tea bottle in the air slightly.
She scowled. “I didn’t say I wanted to do this more.”
“Oh, but you didn’t say no?” Her frown deepened, and he laughed brightly. Kotoko was a bit blunt, but not so scary after all, he decided.


M

One Mistake Cant Make You a Monster

Fuuta can feel the way Es' stare burns into his head. His hands tremble as he reaches for the water left for him. He can feel the tears well in his left eye. His right eye is practically useless after what Kotoko did to him.
The brunette hums, only wanting to learn about Fuuta's thoughts, wanting to learn more of the guilt that was crushing him.

"I am not mad at you, 03. You don't need to be scared of talking to me," Es almost hisses out. Fuuta knows they don't mean harm, the warden just lacks tone control, but he can't help but flinch at the tone regardless. They both feel the way Es' intense stare softens. "Sorry…" They trail.

"I just," Fuuta gulps, eye fixated on the water in front of him. "I don't understand what you want to know. I caused a girl to take her own life due to my own sick sense of justice. I deserve what Kotoko did to me."

Es sighs at the response, fiddling with the rim of their cap. "Kajiyama, it may be best for you to rest before we continue this conversation."

Fuuta raises his head when he hears the heavy door swing open, as if on queue. He drags his sore body up and out of the interrogation room. Trudging to his cell, Fuuta slumps onto his bed.

A pained whine slips from his chapped lips as his torso hits the bed at just the right angle.

Fuuta is somewhat aware of his borderline behavior. He sees it in the way he feels anger claw its way up his throat any time his friends spend more time with one other than with him. He watches the way he's pushed to the side, an outsider trying to look into a place he doesn't belong. He feels the way his nails claw into the skin on the palm of his hand every time it happens. Fuuta, however, thought that this erratic and irrational behavior was beneath him.

The panic-filled, sleepless nights were supposed to be memories of the past, of high school, of a time when he was less mature than he was now. But Fuuta guesses he wasn't meant to be that lucky.

As he looks around his cell, Fuuta thinks back to the day he read that headline, the one that seemingly shattered his world. His head throbs and his vision blurs. Middle schooler, —, found dead in house. Suicide suspected. Not only did the young girl live nearby, but one of his online friends had sent him the link. The guilt clawed its way up his throat. What the fuck had he gotten caught up in?

A scream nearly rips its way out of Fuuta's throat as he lies on his cell bed. Everything is suddenly overwhelming, yet he can't close his eye. Each time he does the messages, news articles, and threats flood in. He can hear Yuno's distant laughter, can feel the way his sweater rubs against his arm like fucking sand paper. The lights are so bright, he can feel each place that Kotoko hit him. He can feel each kick to his ribs. He can feel the way she dug the heel of her boot into his eye, the rawness in his throat when he screamed in agony, the blood. God, he can see the blood. The way it covered him and the floor around him. If he knew what was coming he could have run but… fate has other ideas.
Fuuta didn't realize that he was screaming out loud until he heard his cell door slam open. Actually, there were many things Fuuta didn't realize was happening until the interruption. His uniform sleeve was ripped, small amounts of blood tainting the white canvas fabric. The bandage for his right eye was discarded on the floor, completely useless, and coated in germs, if he ever needed to put it back on. When looking at his mirror, he sees the blood that began to drip from the wound, the claw marks down his arm, the way his uniform was ripped open. It takes him a few seconds to regain his composure before he looks up at the intruder.

Miko-- John, Fuuta reminds himself, stands in his cell doorway. He holds the door open, staring blankly at Fuuta.

"I'm sorry if I woke you," Fuuta coughs out, his voice far more ruined than he expected.

“It’s fine.” John grunts back, he seems to be collecting his thoughts. Green eyes flit around the room, taking in the damage. When they land back on Fuuta, he can feel the small hints of recognition that present themselves in John’s eyes. “Why– What’s going on, Kaji-yama?” Fuuta can’t help but process the way John’s voice has more baritone than Mikoto’s. At first, he wasn’t sure if John and Mikoto were that different after all, but it seems Es was correct.

“Nothing,” The redhead nearly spits out. He doesn’t mean to come off so angry but he can’t help it. He doesn’t want to explain the way guilt grips him by the throat and claws its way out of his mouth. The way it sings ear-piercingly sharp in his ears when he drags his blunt nails down his skin. The way it harmonizes with him as he screams out in pain and watches the blood rush to close his new wounds. Fuuta doesn’t realize that the flood of tears finally broke until he notices the look of recognition in John’s eyes. He can’t imagine the things John has put himself through.

“I mean. It’s not like everything I did was wrong. That teacher did sexually assault a student and the food contamination. For fucks sake, I didn’t even mean for that girl to kill herself,” Fuuta shouts, venom coating his tone. John doesn’t even flinch at the outburst, simply sighing and walking further into the cell.

“Kid, I need you to hear me out. Whatever is going on in that head of yours, isn’t fucking healthy. If you don’t take that time to communicate, you’re going to drown in this abyss you’ve let yourself fall into.” John isn’t angry, he’s not even upset. His tone is clear, unrehearsed, but clear, almost understanding. John slumps down next to Fuuta on his cellbed.

“There’s only so many times you can be voted guilty for a crime you’re not even sure you committed.”

What John said isn't even that impactful, but the way it punches a hole into Fuuta's chest nearly makes him gasp. Tears sting his eye again, he can't do this, he can't fucking do this right now. He can't handle all of the feelings he had been fighting tooth and nail to hold back.

"What am I supposed to do?" Fuuta's voice is weaker than he had expected it to be, his throat feels raw… it feels wrong.

John crosses his arms, leaning back a bit to fully observe Fuuta, there's something familiar in his gaze, but Fuuta didn't have the energy to ponder what it was.

"It's only the first vote that fucked you over," John's voice is surprisingly level, not unlike Mikoto's. "There's two more right?"

"But what about her?" Venom slips from his lips as Fuuta speaks, in an instant the crippling fear that had been seizing his entire being for the past few weeks took hold.

He was back underneath her heel, scrambling to fight her off, to get away, to do something. He felt so damn useless—

"Hey." John's stern voice cuts into Fuuta's spiral, bringing him back into the moment. "She's not here. She can't fucking touch you right now, and chances are she'll be guilty this trial right?"

That's…that's right. Fuuta was in his cell, it was rare he let others into his space, and he rarely left it to begin with. Kotoko was on the other side of the Panopticon, away from Fuuta. As far away as physically possible.

That's…That's good.

Fuuta takes a breath, trying to force his hands to stop shaking as he fixes his gaze to the floor. He can't bring himself to look at John, but it was better than squeezing his eye shut. It was progress.

"Hm?"

“Right… Right,” Fuuta mumbles, picking at his prison uniform. “I’m just…I’m hoping that things will be better than they were in the last trial.”

“Hm?”

Fuuta is quiet for a moment, he’s pondering his next words carefully. “I didn’t mean to do it. At least not to her.”

John is quiet, so Fuuta takes it as an invitation to continue.

“I was right… I was always right. I was just doing it for the greater good you know? I was trying to do what’s right!”

“Good intentions don’t always make for good actions, do they?” John asks, there’s a heavy weight in his voice.

“I was doing what was right! They all fucking deserved it... I-I didn’t know she had permission!” Fuuta cries, feeling the telltale sting in his eye once again. “I didn’t mean to really hurt anyone, I just wanted to help. I—”

John sighs, and rests a strong hand on Fuuta’s shoulder. “You’re not a bad person for wanting to help,” He hums. “Arguably, it makes you a good person. And even good people screw up royally.”

It takes Fuuta longer to process John’s words than he would like to admit. He knows what John said is true. He knows he’s not a bad person. He knows what he did was good. He didn’t mean for that girl to kill herself. It was an accident. He’s learned from it.

After a few minutes of silence, Fuuta looks up at John before sighing loudly. “I think I need to sleep,” Fuuta says with a surprisingly normal tone. “I’m really sorry I bothered you so much, John.”

“It’s alright, I really don’t mind it,” John smiles, for the first time, back at Fuuta. “I’m glad you’ve taken a moment to think things over,” he states plainly before pulling himself up. He nods at Fuuta before pulling Fuuta’s cell door shut and walking down the hall.

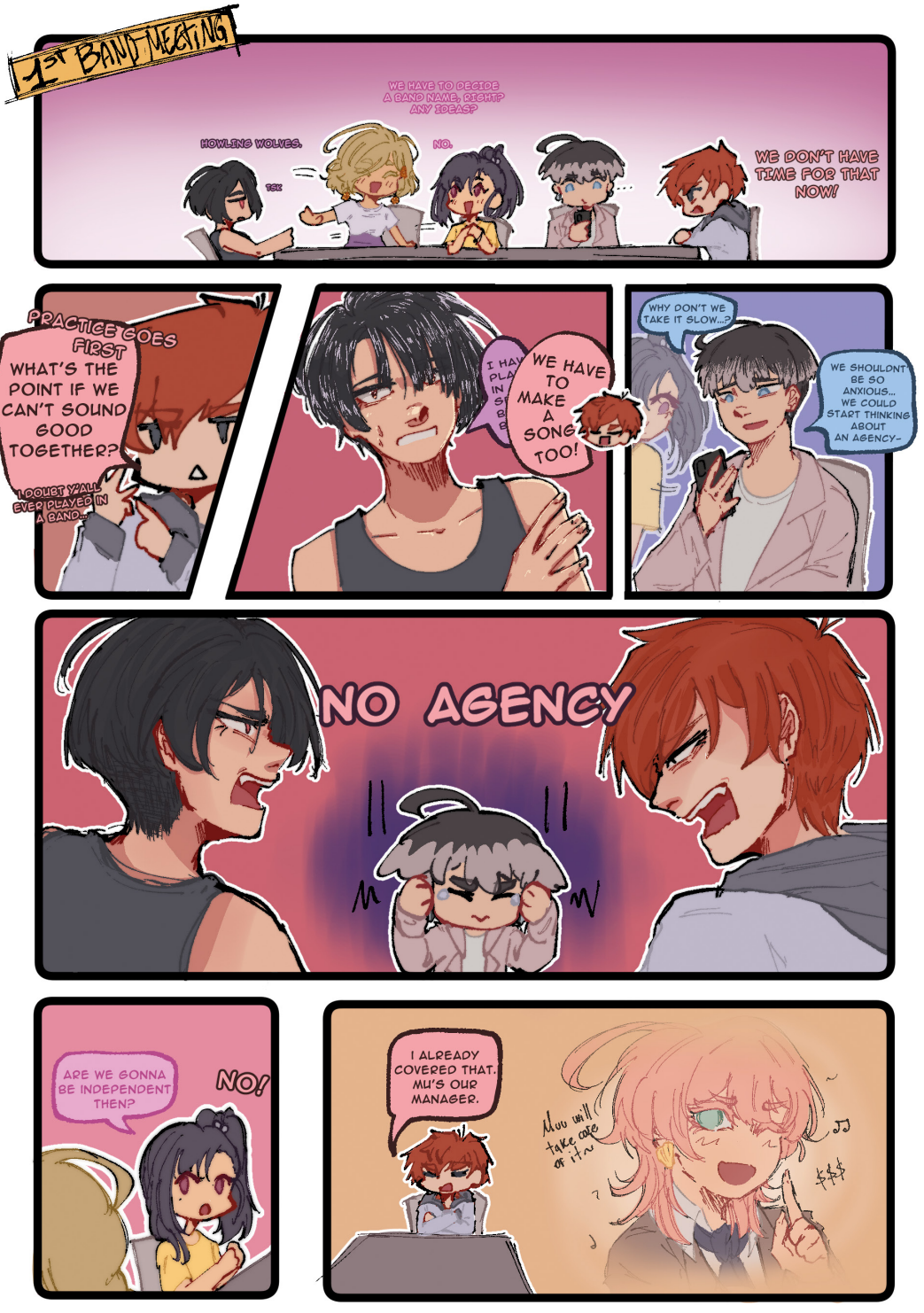
“It’s alright, I really don’t mind it,” John smiles, for the first time, back at Fuuta. “I’m glad you’ve taken a moment to think things over,” he states plainly before pulling himself up. He nods at Fuuta before pulling Fuuta’s cell door shut and walking down the hall.

The silence is deafening barring the soft clicks of John’s shoes as he walks off. Fuuta looks down at his hands, now noticing the bruises and small cuts littering them.

Shaking the thoughts from his head, Fuuta reached down, grabbing his blanket off of the floor before falling into his bed. He needed sleep, maybe then he would be able to fully rest.

Who knows, maybe he’ll get the chance to talk to John again. He seemed like he understood in a way that not a lot of others could, and maybe that’s all Fuuta really needed.

MORE CONFIDENCE, HARUKA!
04
01


1ST BAND MEETING
WE HAVE TO DECIDE A BAND NAME, RIGHT? ANY IDEAS?
HOWLING WOLVES.
NO.
TCH
WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THAT NOW!
PRACTICE GOES FIRST
WHAT'S THE POINT IF WE CAN'T SOUND GOOD TOGETHER?
I DOUBT Y'ALL EVER PLAYED IN A BAND...
I HAV PLA IN ST B E
WE HAVE TO MAKE A SONG TOO!
WHY DON'T WE TAKE IT SLOW...?
WE SHOULDNT BE SO ANXIOUS... WE COULD START THINKING ABOUT AN AGENCY-
NO AGENCY
ARE WE GONNA BE INDEPENDENT THEN?
NO!
I ALREADY COVERED THAT. MU'S OUR MANAGER.
Mou will take care of it~

OH! OH!
WHAT ABOUT OUTFITS? I'VE ALREADY THOUGHT SOME IDEAS!
NICE~
WOAH
WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THAT...
VISUALS ARE IMPORTANT, THOUGH
WE NEED TO HAVE A SENSE OF UNITY...
HMM...
WE WON'T BE A CONVINCING TEAM IF WE ALL GO ON DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS!
EXACTLY!
SERIOUS
TEASING
HEY!
WHATEVER...
WE SHOULD STICK TO PRACTICE FOR NOW.
WAS THAT ALWAYS THERE?!
SO, WHAT'S A SONG ALL OF YOU KNOW?
...
WE'RE NEVER MAKING IT TO A STAGE.

And, Scene

The walk over from the classroom to the auditorium is nothing more than a thick haze of concrete and colors without any friends to share it with. Usually, Yuno will catch at least one of her besties en-route, and they'll laugh and joke and chat until they've made their way inside, down the aisle of seats, and all the way to the spot their little group typically convenes until club activities start.

It's cold.

Yuno walks alone to her club today. She makes her way inside all on her lonesome, pushing open one of the heavy double doors with her shoulder and scanning for their area, only to come up short. For once, she's the first to arrive.

The first out of all of her friends. The first out of all of her peers.

She almost has half a mind to turn on her heel right then and there, prepared to march right out of the theater door she just came through and take the absence rather than sit through an awkward one on one lecture with her teacher.

But the door slams behind her, notifying her teacher of her presence and prompting him to twist towards her in his rolly chair, coaxing her into the room with nothing but a faraway glance, a friendly wave, and the cheerful call of her name.

A shiver curls its way up her spine at the prospect of being caught. She can't turn back now that she's been seen, so she reluctantly makes her way down the aisle, grateful that her lack of expression isn't visible to him from this distance. She can tweak it the closer she gets.

“It’s that time of year where everyone must be getting sick,” she reasons, attempting to make light small talk as she finally affixes a smile to her lips. “Come to think of it, all of my classes were pretty empty today.”
That’s a lie. She doesn’t even recall any of her prior classes. She’s just talking for the sake of talking.

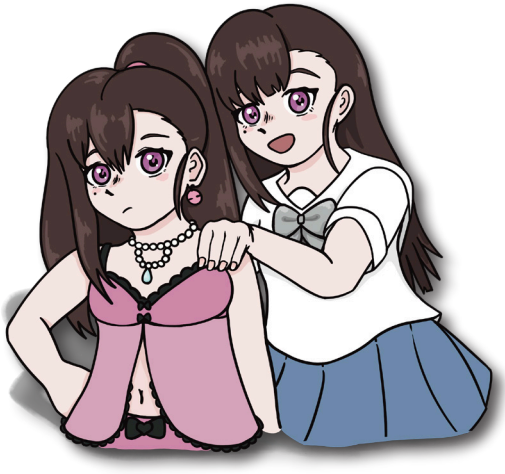
“It’s a miracle I haven’t caught whatever illness is going around, huh?” She inquires, continuing her way down the aisle, placing her backpack in a seat closer to the stage (therefore, closer to her professor’s desk) than where she’d preferably sit before flashing a quick wink over her shoulder towards the only other person in the room there to catch it. “If I weren’t around, you wouldn’t be hosting clubs at all today, would you, professor?”

“That’s right,” the man laughs, as if it’s the most humorous coincidence he’s heard all year. “So let’s not waste time. A talented young actress such as yourself is a rare enough sight. Rarer still in a school like this,” he mentions to her breezily from behind his hand, treating it like a secret.

Courtesy tells her she should laugh along with him and act as if she’s flattered.

It’s cold.

Apathy tells her he’s just like everyone else, and that he doesn’t deserve to rank her above her friends by looks alone. Surely all he’s looking at is her features, not what she holds inside.



She doesn’t get a word in before he’s talking over her thoughts again. “Why don’t you get on that stage, Kashiki. Show me how far you’ve come with that monologue of yours.”

“Right away, sir,” she nods dutifully, walking up to the steps before practically hopping up them two at a time with her hands together behind her back, adorable as a bunny new to spring.

The lights in the house flicker off seemingly at the will of her own imagination; as if this were an official show and not just miscellaneous practice. What else is to blame for the sudden lack of luminosity within the theater with no students around to man them and no audience members in sight, save for her ever observant professor sitting front and center? His undivided attention is plastered upon her like a fresh coat of paint, completely unfazed by how out of place this one woman show seems to be in a school setting, and Yuno can surmise his interest in her for what it really is.

Thank god it was her this man took an interest in and not any of her friends.

Why not her friends?

What does she have to offer over any of them?

As grateful as she is to be the clam that people pry open in search of pearls, she can’t conceive the simple question of why her? What value do her plastic pearls have over the real deal her friends could offer? What is it that people see in her, and why does she thrive off the attention as much as she detests it?

With that, the stage is illuminated too.

It’s cold.

The stage lights are strangely cold as they beam down upon her, more concentrated than an AC unit as she stares down at all of the empty seats. Even the exits are blocked by them now, each aisle completely crammed yet empty at the same time, choking the atmosphere more than a crowd of thousands ever could.

Looking down even further—that is to say, at her own body—she finds she's in a much more revealing outfit than she would ever dare wear to school. Her translucent stockings, pretty and pink, lick at the base of her thighs with a frilly gray finish. The skirt she wears is short, hot pink, and layered with even more frills, "supported" by thin gray strings on either side of her hips, surely holding nothing in place though it's awfully cute that they try.

Her chest is covered, albeit barely, by another form-fitting hot pink and gray article, with more translucent fabric flowing at her sides just beneath her arms. It curtains off her stomach, but does nothing to hide it from the eye of the beholder as she shimmers and shivers beneath the stage lights like a flimsy doll. She doesn't have to see to know how her hair is done up, and she doesn't have to imagine how ruined it'll be by the end of the show if everything goes according to plan.

It's cold. So very cold.

All that's missing is a bundle of string to will her around like the puppet she's become, and even then, she's always the one choosing to bind her own wrists and ankles—to clip her already tattered wings. Will her clients pay extra if she lets them tie her up all pretty? Will it feel just a little bit warmer as the material nips at her skin? Rope burn on the wrists is easily covered by thickets of bracelets and jewelry, after all, and her ankles won't be all that visible beneath a new pair of stockings. They never cease to shower her with the most expensive gifts as thanks.

And as she meets up with her friends at the mall one weekend when this ordeal is done and her wallet is thick with cash, the smiles on their faces will be well worth it as she buys them each a little something as thanks with that dirty money.

Thank you for being my friends.

It doesn't matter if she's left out in the cold for it, alone and trembling with no one to free her from this web and no one but herself to blame for willingly crawling into it.

Thank you for everything.

She can't feel the cold so long as they are warm.

Her alarm wakes her in a cold sweat as she finds herself curled into a shuddering ball. She must've kicked her large yellow comforter into the floor sometime during the night, because it's not wrapped around her the way a cocoon swaddles a newborn butterfly. It lays in a large bundle off the side of her bed, but she doesn't have time to think it over much as she glances at her digital clock.

8:03 AM.

She's going to be late for school.

"Hey, where were you for role call this morning?"

"Yeah, we were awfully worried about you when we heard you didn't even show up!"

"I thought you were just running late or something, Yu, but missing attendance like that? You know that can end up on your permanent record, right? Especially this close to the end of the school year…"

Their concerns are well meaning and at least partially appreciated, but still just a little exhausting as Yuno tries to eat her lunch. Perhaps it would mean a little less to her had she not had that awful dream, and perhaps she would be a little more energetic about it in the first place had the cause for their worry—that is to say, her careless tardiness—not happened in the first place.

All in all, one can't happen without the other. It's a little paradoxical on her behalf to hope for some ideal where her friends will dote on her with nothing bad happening to spark it, but doesn't everyone have that neediness prickle against their skin like frostbite on occasion? The need to be seen, the need to be heard…

The need for warmth.

The worries that they send her way feel so very cozy, like snowflakes made of cashmere delicately sticking to her hair and lashes. The greediness she finds within her own chest for such affections, however, feels colder than coins. The interaction ends up dampening her mood as much as it lifts it.

“Calm down, you worrywarts,” she reassures sweetly. “It’s not like I’d let something like this hold me back from *graduating* or something. I’m cute, but I’m not an airhead, you know!”

Another one of her friends chimes in on her behalf while the others simply frown.

“Chill out, you guys. It’s not like Yuno to care about something like a permanent record anyways.”

It’s not, and Yuno smiles a little to herself as the group gradually falls into disorganized conversation again until the bell rings. Walking to her next class, she misses the delicate temperature of their concerns for her already.

Lukewarm is still considered warm, right?

Each remaining class she attends for the day is average. Clubs are average, with the presence of her friends and her usual teacher in attendance rather than the man from her dream. Even the commute home by bus is overwhelmingly average.

If every minute, every second of someone’s life is meant to lead up to the present moment, she can only help but wonder which action, which grouping of decisions led her here in front of the mirror applying mascara for a date she isn’t even all that into.

Usually she doesn't like to agree to these kinds of outings so late at night, especially not with school the next morning. But duty calls, and the chill in her bones beckons her even faster out the door than any sense of rationality ever could.

Growing up, they always described her as cool, sometimes cold.

Too cool for punishment, too cold to be approached. Too cruel for friends.

Her place in the world had been decided from birth—a lesson she learned far too young in life.

A girl. A lady. A pretty face.

A daughter. A wife. A doll.

Her mother was one such case of this, always there for her, always behind the glass of their family portraits. Her father was always somewhere outside of the frame.

But Yuno's grandparents never scorned Yuno's mother for this, and so while Yuno became certain of how the world might perceive her, she realized every success and every mistake was all relative when it came to family. She might stumble a thousand times, but her family would be there to help her up until she finally learned how to walk. She might find herself with countless helpless crushes on the boys at school, but her family would be there for her until she found the one. She might not remain that bubbly child forever, but her family would stand by her even when the world had numbed her heart and frozen the tear drops to her very cheeks.

While the world left Yuno cold, her home kept her warm.

The man she's set to meet is in his early fifties according to his dating profile.

It's… cold?

But as she returns home and fumbles with the keys to her own house at midnight, quickly falling asleep on the couch after stumbling inside, she awakes to the smell of mom cooking breakfast, and little Yura's favorite blanket tossed over her legs in order to keep her…

Warm.

"Good morning, big sis Yuno!" Yura beams at her from the kitchen with a big wave as he notices her opening her sleepy eyes.

She waves at him too, smiling.

It's warm.

So very warm.

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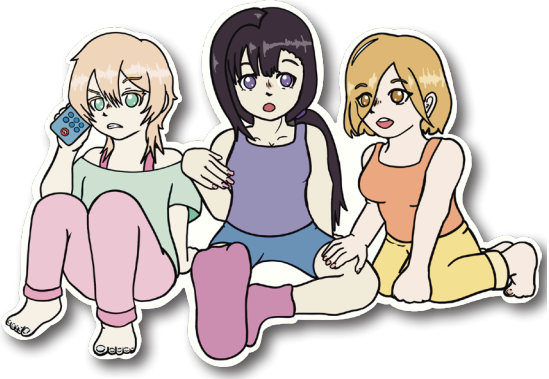

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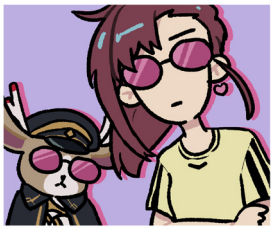

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